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A Radical Journal of Geography

Gillian Hart, *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony*, Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013. ISBN: 978 1 86914 251 3 (paper)*

The Gramsci-inspired bibliography on South Africa is not that large, but does include an influential and serious body work on key conjunctural shifts and political-economic dynamics that have shaped South Africa. In the post-apartheid context two books stand out, Hein Marais's (2001) *South Africa - Limits to Change* and Gillian Hart's more recent *Rethinking the South African Crisis*. Hart's text is extremely important and courageous in the context of South Africa's fiercely contested political discourse. Hart steps in front to contest existing understandings of the state, racial geographies, crisis, hegemony, and transition. Her attempt to challenge what exists is not only an academic intervention but also grounded in deep normative concerns about the trajectory of South African politics.

As a Gramscian feminist and geographer, Hart walks a path with other leading theorists who have provided important ways of placing Gramsci in contemporary social theory. Alongside Anne Showstack Sassoon, Chantal Mouffe, Stuart Hall, Michael Burawoy, and Marcia Landy, Hart brings to the fore three crucial analytical dimensions that mark Gramscian scholarship. She makes a crucial contribution in terms of thinking with and yet going beyond Gramsci with regard to [i] the spatial, [ii] nationalism, and [iii] passive revolution. First, building on her earlier work on Gramsci as a spatial thinker, Hart draws on Lefebvre's work on the production of space and Foucault's work on governmentality, to provide a textured understanding of how technocratic local government has been made, and how it has managed unruly populations in post-apartheid South Africa. She shows how the rationality of Foucaultian governmentality has engendered techniques of rule to ensure fiscal viability through cost recovery from South

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Africa's poor. To develop this argument Hart goes beyond broad macro analyses of the making of local governmentality in South Africa to ground her argument in serious ethnographic work in two towns in the hinterland of South Africa, located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. She builds on her earlier book, *Disabling Globalisation* (Hart 2002), but follows the operations of governmentality at work in local power relations in relation to the commodification of water and the attendant 'water wars'. Water conflicts have been documented previously in South Africa, including the technologies of rule. However, Hart situates this in the context of changing, but still racialised, local geographies, gendered class conflict, and technocratic rule.

In chapter 3, Hart provides ethnographic insights that are both riveting and compelling. In mapping the spatial contours of water conflicts in the towns of Ladysmith and Newcastle, she brings to the fore complex cost recovery practices, the role of a public water corporation leading the commercialisation of water provisioning, and the complex tapestry of local politics. Most analysts have tended to reduce civic protest action either to the 'rebellion of the poor' or 'pop-corn protests' that are episodic and fragmented. However, Hart's ethnographic lens contests these understandings as she probes the intersections of race, class, gender, racialised geography, and technocratic rule. The story she tells about the Newcastle Concerned Residents Association, for instance, and its capacity for symbolic and strategic actions while being eschewed by all political parties, is fascinating and dramatic in its role. Moreover, this line of analysis provides a strong basis from which to argue that the central contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa are located at the level of local government. The squeeze of technocratic cost recovery is central to engendering local social conflict and a crisis for the local state.

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Next, Hart provides a compelling focus on and understanding of articulations of different forms of South African nationalism to render the contemporary country more intelligible. In this way Hart thinks with but also goes beyond Gramsci, by setting up an extremely novel framework to understand the link between de-nationalising and re-nationalising dynamics at work in shaping the form of hegemony prevailing in South Africa. This is very different from other political economy analyses that have either attempted to make sense of the unravelling of ANC hegemony through narrow policy analysis with an emphasis on short-comings, or through a class compromise (or elite pact) understanding of South Africa's post-apartheid politics and transition. In chapter 4, Hart attempts to understand how articulations of the South African nation and hegemonic appropriations of nationalism by the African National Congress feature prominently in the making of contemporary South Africa. Recognising the place of nationalism in ANC discursive practices (e.g. on the national question and National Democratic Revolution) Hart shows how forms of nationalism are made and articulated as part of de-nationalising and re-nationalising processes.

De-nationalisation refers to the processes and practices that globalise and restructure South Africa's domestic political economy, centred on the minerals-energy complex. Re-nationalisation refers to discursive practices and projects shaping articulations of nationalism. Hart brings into the remit of re-nationalisation the various articulations of the 'rainbow nation', the ANC government's punitive immigration practices, grassroots xenophobic attacks, and battles in the ANC-led Alliance about the meanings of the National Democratic Revolution. It is through the prism of de-nationalising and re-nationalising that South Africa's crisis is given a much more complex analytical framing, while attempting to appreciate the country's crisis as the

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unravelling of ANC hegemonic rule as well. All of this connects chapter 2 of the book, which deals with grassroots struggles and containment responses, and chapter 5, which lays bare the degeneration of ANC politics and the rampant populism coming to the fore. As Hart astutely points out, this can go in any direction. It also portends a possible roll back of democratic achievements in South Africa. Hart compels us to ask: is South Africa heading for a new form of fascism, with the emergence of racist and populist young politicians like Julius Malema, a product of ANC authoritarian nationalism?

Finally, chapter 6, illustrates a further engagement and disengagement with Gramsci in thinking about the analytical value and strength of a passive revolution understanding of post-apartheid South Africa. Hart is alive to the challenge of translation of Gramsci's categories in different contexts. Moreover, Hart brings to the fore a crucial link between Gramsci and Fanon to explicate the category of passive revolution as it relates to the racialised dynamics and specificities of race in post-apartheid South Africa. Mobilising Gramsci and Fanon, Hart explores three dimensions of passive revolution: [i] the spatio-historical; [ii] dialectics; and [iii] humanism. This is the most difficult chapter to situate in Hart's sophisticated understanding of South Africa. A meta-reading of the chapter might suggest there is a dialectical connection between unravelling ANC hegemony and now a shift into a passive revolution given the degeneration of ANC nationalism. Are we now witnessing a dialectical historical sequence at work? Despite the difficult fit, the chapter is a crucial theoretical addition.

While Hart makes a major contribution to both analysing and theorising the South African crisis there are two crucial challenges confronting her work. The first relates to spatial reductionism or the idea that the local state is the major site of contradictions and crisis. In this regard Hart has to respond to two criticisms. First, and as she understands,

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the Gramscian conception of the state in the *Prison Notebooks* is that of an ‘integral’ state and at the same time a ‘relational’ state. The integral conception of the state is an expanded one which includes civil and political society (‘state=civil society+political society’) at a national scale. Gramsci observed such a change in the late 1800s in the Western context as part of thinking through the specificity of state-civil society relations. Gramsci’s relational conception of the state recognises that it is also shaped by a historical bloc of social forces. The notion of the historical bloc brings together structures and superstructures; it steers clear of both economic reductionism and idealistic distortions. At a less abstract level of analysis, the leading or hegemonic social force in such a historical bloc is able to define the form, role, and functions of the state. In Gramscian scholarship the ‘integral state’, the ‘relational state’, and the relationship between the two has engendered its own interpretive controversies about the relationship between hegemony, civil society, and the state. However, for the sake of this argument, recognising that there is a specific conception of the state at work within Gramsci’s thought makes it difficult to merely think about crisis as simply engulfing the local state. What about the state in crisis in its integral sense and at the national scale? What about the crisis of the historical bloc of forces making up the ruling forces prevailing over the state in its totality?

Second, and flowing from the idea of a crisis of the integral state, is a recognition that cost recovery and technocratic forms of rule have diffused into various levels of the state. The state, in asserting a financialised rationality in its provisioning of public goods, at the same time faces various challenges from myriad social forces, on different terrains. This means there are multiple spatial choke points to both contest the state and engender fiscal crisis; the geographies of resistance are more than just water wars. For example,

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attempts at imposing a toll road system in Gauteng province, the heartland of South Africa, has met with stiff resistance from unions, commuters, and citizens. This has placed the multi-billion rand project in crisis and the gridlock has even affected South Africa's standing with credit rating agencies. Similarly, billions spent on building coal-fired power stations (in Medupi and Kusile, for example) have stalled on numerous occasions, around workers demanding higher pay and improved working conditions. At the same time, consumers have been fighting against electricity price hikes that are meant to assist Eskom (South Africa's electricity parastatal) pay back billions in World Bank finance for these projects. All of these spatial choke points have also added to the total crisis of the integral state and the ANC-led historical bloc of class and social forces prevailing over the state.

A final challenge to Hart's intervention relates to her eschewing a role for a sophisticated political economy analysis that places neoliberalism at the centre of understanding post-apartheid South Africa. By dismissing such forms of analysis as 'not having traction', we are left with an analysis centred mainly on the unravelling of ANC hegemony devoid of any understanding of how ANC hegemonic nationalism and neoliberalism articulate, on the one side, and on the other, how social struggles and left alignments are forming in response to this. The Marikana massacre that Hart correctly identifies as important, has not only contributed to a rupture in the ANC-led historical bloc of class forces, but has also been a spur to major class realignments and detachments from the ANC-led Alliance. Besides the decline of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), once upon a time the largest union in South Africa and a staunch ally of the ANC, the Marikana conjuncture has ruptured the working class support base of the ANC-led bloc of forces in the direction of left re-alignment. In this regard, the decision by the

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National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA; currently the largest union in South Africa with over 300,000 workers) to withdraw from the ANC-Led Alliance, to declare it is not supporting any party in the forthcoming national elections(it is withdrawing its awesome organisational machinery from actively campaigning for the ANC), and to initiate a process of left convergence with social movements and other progressive forces to form a united front and explore the possibility of a worker's party, is extremely significant. It is even more significant because the entire discourse of the NUMSA is about the defeat of the working class because of 20 years of post-apartheid neoliberalisation. Furthermore the NUMSA evokes a form of nationalism other than the one Hart discusses: it points to a betrayal of the Freedom Charter, the cornerstone programmatic commitment and revolutionary nationalist basis of the ANC-led Alliance. Further evidence of this betrayal for the NUMSA is the state-led massacre of 36 mineworkers on 16 August 2012 in Marikana. Unfortunately, Hart's analysis will have difficulties making sense of this rupture given that it articulates a strong critique of the ANC's commitment to neoliberalism, particularly the recently adopted National Development Plan. The NUMSA's organic intellectuals have a lived experience of neoliberalisation as thousands of jobs have been lost in South Africa's liberalised manufacturing sector. They are certainly not spinning their wheels as Hein Marais suggests in his endorsement of Hart's text.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Hart's contribution is a welcome addition to the ongoing challenge to make sense of the complicated field of South African politics.

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Endnote

*There is a new edition of the book (including a note on South Africa after Mandela) forthcoming in the University of Georgia's 'Geographies of Justice and Social Transformation' book series - Hart G (2014) *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony* (new edn). Athens: University of Georgia Press. Under review here is the 2013, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press version.

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March 2014